

Ch'an Newsletter

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THE ELEMENTS OF CONSCIOUSNESS

(Lecture given by Master Sheng-yen on the Surangama Sutra, Sunday, November 15, 1987)

I want to begin by talking about consciousness, because not everyone is familiar with what the term means, and there are many who have not heard of the sixth, seventh, or eighth consciousness. Consciousness can be understood as having three different forms, or aspects, into which are divided the eight levels of consciousness (shown in parentheses). The first form is the consciousness of contact (1 - 5). The second is that of discernment (6 - 7). The third is that of fundamental consciousness (8).

The consciousness of contact arises when one of the five sense organs (eye, ear, nose, tongue, or body) comes into contact with one of the five sense objects (what we see, hear, smell, taste, or touch). When sense organs come into contact with sense objects, the consciousness of contact arises. These are the first five kinds of consciousness and they are operative every day of our lives, so long as we are awake and functioning. When we fall asleep, the five consciousnesses no longer function.

Everyday, whether we are on the street or at home, wherever we are, we hear sounds and see things, but these contacts do not necessarily leave deep impressions, nor do they necessarily cause us to react. For example, when I first came to the United States, I went to school everyday to study English. I travelled during rush hour, and I passed hundreds of people each day, some standing, some seated, some singing, some yelling. They made little impression on me – I looked without seeing. But one time I met a Korean on the train, who I had at first thought was Japanese. I had just come over from Japan, and my Japanese was far superior to my English, so I thought that I might talk to him. He told me that he was Korean, not Japanese, but that he did, indeed, speak Japanese. This event made an impression on me. It is mental activity of this sort, where memory, discernment, or association is involved, that enters into the sixth consciousness. Things that just pass by our senses, that our minds do not dwell on, are in the realm of the five consciousnesses.

There are actually three kinds of sixth consciousness. The story about my meeting the Korean is an example of the first kind: the consciousness that arises simultaneously with the operation of the first five consciousnesses, when sense organ comes into contact with sense object. Thus I saw this man and heard his voice and developed an impression of him. This impression lies in the first kind of sixth consciousness. The important thing to remember here is that this aspect of sixth consciousness arises directly from the immediate environment – what you see, hear, taste, smell, and touch.

The second and third aspects of sixth consciousness are both called "isolated sixth consciousness." One type of isolated consciousness is that associated with dreams and daydreams. When you dream or daydream, your thoughts are unrelated to what you see and hear – thus your thoughts arise in isolation from your immediate environment. The other type of isolated consciousness is that which arises in samadhi – this, too, is isolated from your immediate environment.

The seventh consciousness is really a part of the sixth – it is sometimes called the "organ" of the sixth consciousness. Like the "isolated sixth consciousness," the seventh consciousness is completely separate from the five consciousnesses. The key to understanding the seventh consciousness is in seeing how it maintains a sense of self-attachment. Yes, it is true that a sense of attachment to self can apply to the sixth consciousness, but this attachment is really to the things that manifest in the sixth consciousness from the outside world – this is "my book"; this is "my country." It is an attachment of self to environment. However, the seventh consciousness channels attachment to the deepest sense of self – this is happening "to me"; this is "who I am" – into the eighth consciousness. Thus the seventh consciousness acts as a kind of bridge between the sixth and the eighth consciousness. The seventh consciousness, in a sense, is kind of stupid in the way that it functions. Regardless of what you do, bad actions or good actions, everything that you do is pulled into the eighth consciousness with the idea "this is my action." Without the seventh consciousness, there would be no boundaries defined for the individual. The seventh consciousness is the center of the "I" consciousness. It is from here that sentient beings get their idea of self. But sentient beings are not aware of this seventh consciousness. By channeling our actions into the eighth consciousness, the seventh consciousness maintains the continuity of self that keeps us in samsara – moving from one lifetime to the next.

The eighth consciousness, "the fundamental consciousness," is also known as "the continuously transforming consciousness," or "the seed consciousness." It is known as the continuously transforming consciousness because it maintains our continuity in samsara – from rebirth to rebirth, from realm to realm. It is the consciousness that follows us from one lifetime to the other.

The "seed" referred to in "seed consciousness" is a "karmic seed." What are karmic seeds? When we act, we create karma. Eventually, there will be reactions to our actions – karmic consequences. But before these consequences appear, the

potential for them to manifest is contained in a "karmic seed." There are three kinds of karmic seed – the virtuous seed, the evil seed, and the unmoving seed. Virtuous seeds come from good acts; evil seeds from bad acts. Unmoving seeds come from the practice of samadhi. We have created these seeds from the actions we have taken. The totality of our karmic seeds comprises what is called our eighth consciousness. The seventh consciousness is called "the gatekeeper" because it "guards" all of the karmic seeds that lie in the eighth consciousness. It guards these seeds by maintaining a sense of self. The kind of karmic seeds we have planted determines what kind of rebirth we will have and where we will be reborn.

How do karmic seeds eventually mature and become karmic consequences? It depends on what kind of seed dominates in the eighth consciousness. If, for example, the karmic seed for rebirth as a pig dominates, you will be reborn into the realm of desire as a pig. If unmoving karmic seeds dominate, then you will be reborn into either the form realm or the formless realm; you will not be reborn into the realm of desire. Beings are reborn in the realm of desire because either the virtuous or the evil seeds dominate.

How can bodhisattvas be born into our world, which is in the realm of desire? Bodhisattvas come into this world through the power of their vows, not through the power of karma. They choose to come into this world. A bodhisattva able to do this would have to at least achieved the first bhumi, so that he is no longer controlled by karmic seeds. As a bodhisattva moves higher and higher in attainment, the seeds become less potent. They no longer mature, and when they lose all of their power, the bodhisattva will attain Buddhahood. As far as practice for ordinary sentient beings is concerned, the attachment to self is the greatest obstacle to liberation. Until this attachment is cut, you will be transformed again and again within the realms of samsara. It is in the sixth consciousness that a practitioner starts letting go of self. Eventually, diligent practice will cause the sense of self to drop away in the seventh consciousness, and finally the karmic seeds in the eighth consciousness will lose their power so that final liberation can be achieved.

Now that I have given some description of consciousness, I will discuss some of the points that are brought up in the passage on consciousness in the *Surangama Sutra*.

There are three questions that are asked in this passage. First, how does consciousness arise? Second, what is the relationship between the element of consciousness and the other elements? Third, how is the element of consciousness related to the Tathagata Store (Tathagatagarbha – the absolute in the midst of desires and passions)?

The sutra first asks how consciousness arises. In the case of seeing, does it arise from the seeing (perception) itself? Does it arise from form (the thing that is

seen)? Does it arise from empty space (neither form nor perception)? Or does it arise from no cause at all?

How is sight perception possible? There must be a combination of conditions. There must be an eye to see, a sense organ. There must be something to see, a sense object. There must be a spatial relationship between the eye and the object. If something were pressed up against your eye, could you see it clearly? And the proper light conditions must exist for seeing to occur. Thus there must be eye, object, spatial relationship, and light for seeing to occur. When all of these conditions are present, consciousness arises. But if we look individually into all of the conditions for seeing, in none do we have consciousness by itself. But when all of these conditions are present, we have seeing and we have the consciousness of seeing.

In ancient India there were two important schools of philosophy, which were diametrically opposed. One held that all things arise from cause and conditions, the other that all things occur for no reason. You might think that the views of the cause-and-condition school were identical to those of Buddhism. However, there is an important difference. Those adhering to the cause-and-condition school believe that these causes and conditions are absolutely true in and of themselves, that they are real dharmas. But when Buddhists talk of causes and conditions, we recognize that they are themselves empty dharmas having no real existence. Thus causes and conditions are really false concepts. Theists, in effect, follow the cause-and-condition school, and they trace everything back to an original cause or a concept of a god. Atheists and pure materialists, on the other hand, are proponents of the no-cause school. Buddhism is something different, not altogether one school or the other. Buddhism is not theistic – there is no recognition of a god as a final cause. And Buddhism views causes and conditions as only false names. On the other hand, Buddhism does not subscribe to the purely materialistic view that things arise with no cause. The *Surangama Sutra* refutes both these schools by showing that the conditions for seeing, that I spoke about before, are themselves only false names, and that the idea that things arise abruptly, with no cause, is also false. In this way the *Surangama Sutra* is closely allied with the Madhyamika school of Buddhism.

To show how the sutra answers the second question, "What is the relationship between consciousness and the other elements?" I must explain what the seven elements are, and how the sutra views them.

Usually we speak of six elements. These include the four elements, earth, fire, wind and water, which comprise the material realm, and to these are added empty space and consciousness – six altogether. Then how do we get seven elements? The *Surangama Sutra* actually distinguishes two aspects of empty space. The first aspect has to do with discerning space by the presence or absence of substance within space. The second aspect concerns discerning space by the presence or absence of light within space. Thus space with its two aspects becomes elements five and six,

and consciousness, which really incorporates all of the other elements, becomes the seventh. Thus to explain the relationship between consciousness and the other elements, the sutra shows that consciousness is not separate nor different from the first six elements.

When I say that consciousness exists in the previous elements, you may wonder if I am referring to the sixth consciousness or the eighth. The sutra, in this particular section, would seem to refer to the sixth consciousness because this consciousness arises in combination with other factors, such as form, empty space, and light. In the eighth consciousness there is no need for such conditions. The eighth consciousness, by the way, is what is referred to by the "Consciousness Only" school. According to this school, everything in this world, in the universe, any thought or thing – arises from consciousness.

Some of you might mistake the consciousness that arises in combination with other factors, the sixth consciousness, for that consciousness which gives rise to all things, the eighth. This could lead to some misunderstanding. The eighth consciousness is, after all, what leads us from birth to birth, realm to realm. If you believed that the sixth consciousness had such power, then if you thought of something, it would simply come into being. If your discerning mind ceased functioning, the world would cease to exist. You could simply imagine a pot of gold, or a man could think of Snow White, or a woman of Prince Charming, and all of these things would instantly appear in the world. But of course we know that such things do not happen at will.

Is the *Surangama Sutra* making a mistake? Is there some confusion in the text? No, when the sutra speaks of consciousness, it does not specify a particular level. The sutra takes consciousness to mean that particular thought which is in our mind anytime that our mind is moving. At any moment this thought incorporates the totality of our life from beginningless time to the endless future. The totality of our merits, virtues, sins – all our karmic acts for all time – are included in this single thought. The three thousand dharma realms are included in this single thought. This thought, this consciousness, refers to our illusory mind, and the sutra goes on to show that this illusory mind, at any given moment, is not separate from our true mind. This leads into the discussion of the Tathagata Store.

Ultimately, consciousness here refers to the mind. This mind is not distinguished from the illusory mind or the pure, undefiled mind. All are contained in this mind. In this sense the *Surangama Sutra* differs from the Consciousness Only school because the latter school clearly differentiates between the defiled, illusory mind and the pure, undefiled mind. The sutra makes no such distinction.

Now the third question. Is the Tathagata Store different from or the same as this consciousness? The answer to this is shown in a couplet that appears at the end of every paragraph that speaks of the elements. This couplet is not in Charles

Luk's translation. The first line states, "The nature of consciousness is a true knowing, or true illumination." This is to say that even though we may use various names for the elements – earth, fire, water, wind, space, consciousness – the true nature of these elements is the same as Buddha-nature. And Buddha-nature is the same as true illumination. Thus the nature of consciousness, like the nature of the other elements, is true illumination. The second line of the couplet reads, "Only when one realizes true illumination will one know what true consciousness is." If you have no realization of true illumination, you can only know illusory consciousness, not true consciousness. And true consciousness is the same as the Tathagata Store.

We have talked a great deal about consciousness. Perhaps we can consider this question: Is consciousness useful? Is it a good thing or a bad thing? What is bad about consciousness is that it allows us to create the three kinds of karmic seeds. If you create good or bad karma, then you stay in the realm of desire. If you create unmoving karma, then the best you can do is get into the form or the formless realm. Karma does not get you to liberation. But if you understand Buddhadharma and if you practice freedom from self, then you will not create any of the three kinds of karma. Rather, you will generate karma without outflow – karma that has no self associated with it. Practice of freedom from self can lead to the bodhisattva stage. Then if you come to this world, it will be to help sentient beings, not because of karmic retribution. For those of you who have listened to the *Surangama Sutra*, it is important that you practice. Even though you may think you understand what is taught here, you still have a sense of self – externally, the self of the sixth consciousness; internally, the self of the seventh consciousness. The practice of samadhi is not enough. It is also necessary to practice Ch'an; that is, the practice of wisdom together with the practice of virtue and merit.

ERRATA

Last issue of the Ch'an Newsletter we changed to a new computer system, and we missed some errors. Corrections are preceded by page, paragraph, and line number:

(1,3,5) The fleshy eye is so weak that is almost useless.

(3,6,1) In Ch'an we only consider it important to deal with two of the five eyes, the ordinary eye and the Buddha eye.

(4,6,5) He said that the fleshy eye is of little use anyway, and there are better eyes to acquire.

(5,3,5) The heavenly eye, within its realm, knows what is going on in all places at all times.

(5,5,6) - because it leads us to our true nature.

* * * NEWS ITEMS * * *

On November 17, Shih-fu spoke at Butler University, having been invited by the university's Department of Religion. The lecture, "*The Life of a Ch'an master and Practicing in a Ch'an Monastery*" drew a large audience, among which were more than ten distinguished faculty members.

On November 18, Shih-fu was guest lecturer in two World Religion classes, speaking on "*The Principle, History and Methods of Ch'an*".

Immediately after his lectures at Butler University, Shih-fu travelled to Champaign, Illinois to sit with and speak to a Zen meditation group founded by professors and students at the University of Illinois.

On November 19, Shih-fu lectured on "*Ch'an Masters and Ch'an Practice*". The assembly was organized by Peter Gregory, Professor of Asian Religions at the University of Illinois.

On the evening of November 19, Shih-fu arrived in Iowa City and gave a talk at a home which is the center for a local Buddhist group.

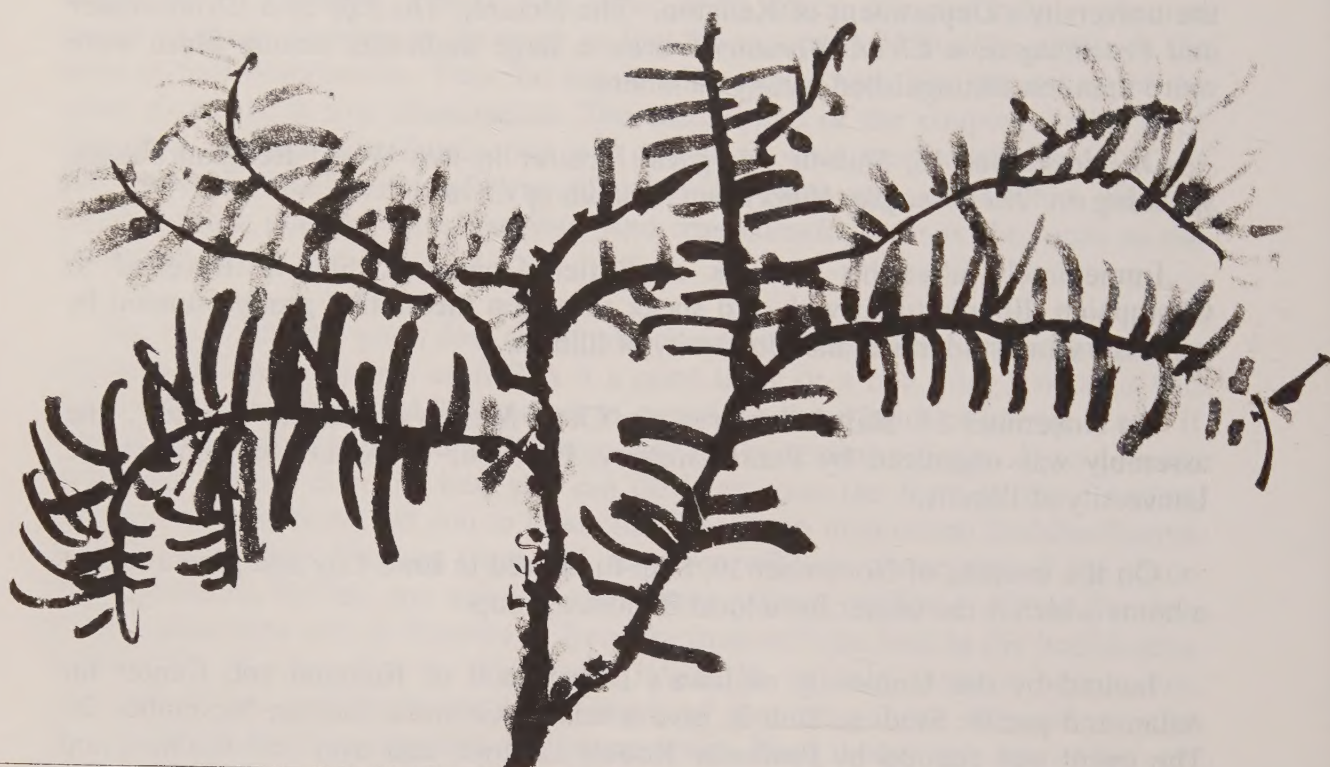
Invited by the University of Iowa's Department of Religion and Center for Asian and Pacific Studies, Shih-fu gave a talk in Gilmore Hall on November 20. The event was chaired by Professor Robert Leutner, and over 160 teachers and students attended. Shih-fu lectured on "*The Principle and Practice of Ch'an Meditation*".

The response to these talks was enthusiastic, and the participants and organizers were deeply gratified. All involved invited Shih-fu to return in the near future to speak on more topics.

In early November, twelve eminent guests - Dharma Masters from Taiwan, Australia, Sri Lanka, England, and several U.S. States - visited the Ch'an Center and exchanged ideas concerning ways to spread the Dharma in the West. The guests were impressed with the new center, and it was interesting to hear Shih-fu converse in Chinese, Japanese and English.

Twenty-two people attended the November retreat, the first one held at the new center. The consensus is that it is an excellent place for retreats. The Christmas retreat has over 30 applicants already (our limit is 30). We are looking forward to an energetic retreat.

On December 5, we held a Beginner's Meditation Class with 30 students. It was the largest turnout we've ever had in New York. The next one will be held in the spring, when Shih-fu comes back from Taiwan. He leaves January 8, and will return at the end of April.



Ch'an Meditation Center
Institute of Chung-Hwa Buddhist Culture
90-56 Corona Avenue
Elmhurst, N.Y. 11373
(718) 592-6593

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